

Couple go 'from zero kids to 5 girls' in under 2 years

Award recognizes pair
who adopted four sisters

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LOWELL — As they got to know a young girl named Phalesha, Amara and Ryan Kyes had no idea adoption might be in the cards. After all, they still felt like kids themselves.

"Phalesha and I just clicked," said Amara Kyes, 25, recalling when they first met in 2000 at a summer camp in Wyoming for at-risk youth.

They soon wondered what this girl from a deeply troubled home might do with some love and attention.

"She was a great little kid, very outgoing. She was really just in need of some love," said Ryan Kyes, 28.

They have their answer.

Five years later, the Kyeses are adoptive parents to Phalesha, now 14, and her three sisters — Rachelle, 16; Noelle, 12, and Vonda, 11. They also have an 11-month-old daughter of their own, Makayla.

"We went from zero kids to five girls in about a year-and-a-half," Ryan Kyes quipped, as if still in shock at these rapid family developments.

The Kyeses were honored with the "Angels in Adoption" award, a national honor sponsored by the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute. In a ceremony set for 9 a.m. today at Catholic Social Services in Grand Rapids, U.S. Rep. Vern Ehlers, R-Grand Rapids, was to pay tribute to the Kyeses for their dedication and sacrifice.

"It's just outstanding," Ehlers said. "I am convinced over the years that volunteerism is what works and really solves the problems. Government can't solve all the problems."

The Kyeses said they never charted a course toward adoption. It just happened, perhaps subconsciously driven by the fact each of them had been adopted as well.

Still, they confessed they sometimes wondered what they were doing after they took in Phalesha and Rachelle.

"We were so young," Ryan recalled. "It was, 'How can we do this?' Then it was, 'How can we not do this?'"

Says Phalesha: "It means a lot. It shows that somebody other than your biological parents are out there and love you and want to take care of you."

Over time, the Kyeses learned some of the bleak details of the siblings' background. Their father was gone. Their mother was often out of the house, leaving the girls to fend for themselves.



PRESS PHOTO/T.J. HAMILTON

Growing family: Ryan and Amara Kyes with their children, from left, Rachelle, Vonda, Phalesha and Noelle. Ryan holds Makayla, 10 months.

Ryan Kyes recalled one of their homes: "You could smell it from about two or three houses away. There was trash in the yard, all over the place."

They would learn later that the girls were sometimes out on their own late at night, wandering around downtown Grand Rapids at 2 a.m. or 3 a.m.

"They pretty much had to raise themselves," he said.

The girls were removed from their mother's care for abuse and neglect in 2003. The two older girls came to live with the Kyeses as foster daughters that year and were joined the next

year by their two sisters.

Their adoptions were finalized Oct. 11.

Perhaps because they set no expectations for their adopted daughters, they have been astonished by how far they have come.

When they first began school in the Lowell Public Schools, Ryan Kyes said: "Every one failed their classes."

Now they are flourishing, taking home As and earning spots on the honor roll.

"They had all the potential," Ryan said. "Kids in general are pretty resilient. All it takes is a proper environment and love."